

# P R O T E U S

A NINETEENTH CENTURY VISION

## REVIEWS AND ARTICLES

### VARIETY

#### ***PROTEUS* by Scott Foundas**

Man's dream of uniting nature and art forms the subject of *Proteus*, a stimulating scientific inquiry that may cause audiences to look at (and think about) the world around them in dramatically different terms. The first feature-length work by documentary and avant-garde filmmaker David Lebrun, one-of-a-kind pic, reportedly some two decades in the making, should become a sought-after item on the fest circuit and for experimental film showcases. Tube sales should also be brisk, though Lebrun's majestic, laboriously hand-crafted images more than deserve the splendor of the big screen.

Pic begins as an ostensibly straightforward investigation into the life and work of 19th century artist and biologist Ernst Haeckel, whose major work, *Art Forms in Nature*, synthesized his two disparate passions by presenting lithographs of some 4,000 species of previously unidentified single-celled sea creatures called radiolarian. Haeckel did both the identification and the lithography.

Haeckel's story becomes the jumping-off point for a series of fecund associations in which Lebrun establishes connective tissue between Haeckel and such unlikely compatriots as Sigmund Freud and Vladimir Lenin, the architects of the first transatlantic telegraph cable and the fictional title character of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (beautifully voiced by Richard Dysart).

It's a very dense amount of material to pack into an hour of screentime, but Lebrun manages to make it seem effortless, never moving too fast for non-science types to keep up. In the end, Lebrun keeps bringing it all back, dazzlingly, to Haeckel.

Like his subject's own work, *Proteus* (pic appropriately takes its name from the shape-shifting Greek god of the sea) does not merely represent a casual interest in a subject. Rather, what gives the film its propulsive strength is the sense that Lebrun has fully given himself over to Haeckel, allowing himself to become consumed to the point of near-obsession.

Particular energy has been spent on finding the ideal way to convey Haeckel's unique images in a distinctly cinematic vessel. *Proteus* is a constant visual treat, as Lebrun takes photographs of Haeckel's actual drawings and animates them in ways that make Haeckel's splendiferous orbs and tentacles dance in an array of carefully choreographed

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patterns. (Technique recalls what Thom Andersen did with the photographs of Muybridge in his 1974 *Eadwaerd Muybridge, Zoopraxographer*.)

In the end, Lebrun makes audiences contemplate the majestic vastness of the natural universe and its complex artistic perfection in ways that even Haeckel could only have imagined.

## **SUNDANCE FILM FESTIVAL CATALOG**

### ***PROTEUS* by Shari Frilot**

Can the rigor of science combine with the passion and emotion of art to create a unified vision of the world? This was the question pursued by Ernst Haeckel, one of the most influential minds of the nineteenth century. Through an exquisite tapestry of poetry and myth, biology and oceanography, scientific history and spiritual biography, David Lebrun's remarkable documentary *Proteus* tells the story of Haeckel and his role in our evolving epistemology while offering a parable about both the difficulty and possibility of a unified vision.

Biologist and painter Haeckel (1834-1919) felt torn between seeming irreconcilables: science and art, materialism and religion, rationality and passion. A commercial drive to lay the transatlantic telegraphic cable led to an epic oceanographic voyage to explore the ultimate scientific frontier at that time--the bottom of the sea. This voyage caused Haeckel to discover the radiolarian. Incredibly beautiful and diverse, these tiny one-celled creatures are among the earliest forms of life. They were the key to Haeckel's vision: In their intricate geometric skeletons, he saw all the future possibilities of organic and created form.

Nineteenth-century paintings, graphic art, photographs, and scientific illustrations come magically to life through Lebrun's innovative animation techniques. Complemented by an atmospheric score, narration, and sound design, *Proteus* is a splendid investigation of the sea and nineteenth-century imagination.

## **PARK CITY RECORD**

### ***FILM TAKES THOUGHTFUL STROLL ALONG BORDER OF ART AND SCIENCE: DAVID LEBRUN DOCUMENTARY PROFILES 19<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY SCIENTIST* by Nan Chalat-Noaker**

David Lebrun was driving along in Hollywood when he heard the perfect voice for his film. The noted Broadway actress Marian Seldes was narrating a story on National Public Radio.

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"It was captivating. I pulled over and wondered, 'Who is that voice?'" Lebrun quickly tracked her down in New York and waited in the wings as she concluded her performance in an off-Broadway production of an Edward Albee play. On the advice of a friend in the theater business, Lebrun offered Seldes "a single white rose" and the deal was sealed. She agreed to narrate *Proteus*, a film that Lebrun had been personally nurturing for 22 years.

It is, in part, a story about a scientist, Ernst Haeckel, who dedicated his life to the study of microscopic organisms on the ocean floor. But Lebrun, an anthropological film maker, saw Haeckel's work in a much larger context.

The great debate during Haeckel's life at the turn of the 19th century centered on reconciling new scientific theories with existing religious and cultural dogma. According to Lebrun's beautifully written narrative, the scientist's parents wanted their son to become a doctor. Haeckel, however, had an artist's temperament.

The two paths merge when Haeckel discovers and begins documenting an ocean-dwelling, one-celled organism, the radiolarian. The biologist/artist's stunning drawings of 4,000 species of radiolaria form the backdrop for Lebrun's documentary.

Lebrun's spin on Haeckel's work is understandable considering his own background. The filmmaker, whose father was a well-known painter, was born in Los Angeles and sent to an alternative high school in Arizona that emphasized world cultures. In college, Lebrun opted to study the philosophy of culture, myth and religion.

"Then someone put a camera in my hands", he says.

Lebrun's passion for examining diverse cultures led him to his own Plains Indian quest and later to an in-depth study of Mayan culture. A National Endowment for the Humanities grant eventually led to a four-part Public Broadcasting System series on a Maya village in the Yucatan.

But Haeckel stayed in the back of his mind and finally, Lebrun was able to set aside time to finish it. Not knowing if *Proteus* really fit any specific category, last fall Lebrun entered it in the Sundance Film Festival Documentary competition. When they called him, he said, "It was stunning to hear I was in; at times I thought the film would sink like a stone in the sea."

Sundance chose to place the film in the "Special Screenings" category, which is just fine with Lebrun. "To any degree I can get it shown, I'll be delighted", he said, adding that he

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is most looking forward to seeing his film with an audience and "seeing what the response is."

## L.A. WEEKLY

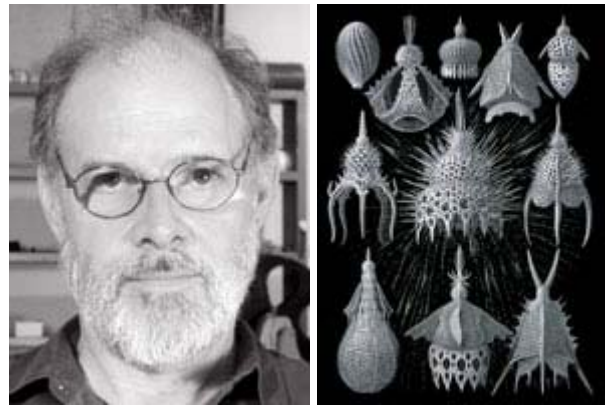
***A MID-FESTIVAL REPORT FROM SUNDANCE 2004* by Ron Stringer**

Five days into Sundance 2004, the pickings — not so much in the dramatic competition and high-profile premieres as in the Frontier, World Cinema and Special Screenings niches — have been anything but slim. In new work from past presenters, the promise of earlier panache finds mature fulfillment... Stir into the mix the usual sprinkling of thoughtful documentaries, innovative shorts and unclassifiable experiments (David Lebrun's *Proteus*, an exposition of the beatific vision of 19th-century artist and marine biologist Ernst Haeckel; and Jessica Yu's *In the Realms of the Unreal*, an exploration of a 15,000-page graphic novel by the reclusive Catholic schizophrenic Henry Darger, come first to mind) and you have the makings of a high old time in Park City. So far, anyway.

## ANIMATION WORLD MAGAZINE

***THE NEW AGE OF ANIMATION AT SUNDANCE* by Mary Ann Skweres**

In mesmerizing sequences of evolving shapes, animation brings to life the intricate geometric skeletons and extraordinary beauty of tiny undersea organisms called radiolarian in the documentary, *Proteus* (60 min., color, 35mm). Nineteenth century biologist and artist, Ernst Haeckel's (1834-1919) lithographs of the single-cell life forms inspired producer/writer/director/editor David Lebrun to explore that century's fascination with the sea, once the ultimate scientific frontier. Told almost completely with 19th century images, the visual core of the film is artwork photographed from the originals at the Ernest Haeckel Haus in East Germany, and animated using traditional techniques — photographing cells on an Oxberry optical printer. Texts from period letters, poetry, ship logs and scientific discourses make up the narrative. Taking 23 years, the project was completed on weekends or when Lebrun had some time off, "This was my labor of love. I found myself, not having originally planned to, doing an animated feature by myself. That's a big job."



Inspired by the lithographs of 19th century biologist and artist Ernst Haeckel, filmmaker David Lebrun (left) labored for 23 years to make *Proteus*. Courtesy of Night Fire Films.

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## WIRED.COM

### ***DOCUMENTARIES DRAW ON ANIMATION* by Jason Silverman**

Even 10 years ago, mixing animation and documentary would have been both impractical and taboo -- animation emerges from the brain of an artist, while documentary is supposed to be grounded in objective truth.

But the plummeting costs of animation and dissolving rules of nonfiction have brought this cinematic odd couple together. Michael Moore's Oscar-winning *Bowling for Columbine* featured an animated sequence created by Howard Moss. Recent PBS documentaries *Hybrid* and *Repetition Compulsion* were largely or entirely animated.

Animation, according to Cara Mertes, executive director of the PBS nonfiction series P.O.V., is one sign of a brave new era of documentary.

"Documentary has never been more exciting, and that's because of the expansion of the form," said Mertes. "Filmmakers are incorporating fictional elements, experimental elements and animation, and the animation that documentary filmmakers are using has been wonderfully imaginative and extremely effective."

Filmmakers are bringing a number of different styles and methods of animation to their documentaries. *In the Realms of the Unreal* used After Effects to create a staccato, childlike motion -- like Colorforms come to life -- perfectly appropriate to the subject matter. David Lebrun, in his documentary *Proteus*, used quick cutting of photographic images to create an animation-like effect.

*Proteus* explores the life of the 19th- and 20th-century scientist Ernst Haeckel, who discovered, among other things, the radiolarian -- a single-celled organism that comes in a startling diversity of geometric forms. Haeckel sketched more than 4,000 of these, and Lebrun, through a complicated and painstaking photographic process, transferred 1,000 to film.

Lebrun then combined these still images in a process similar to traditional cel animation. Because of that, *Proteus* is as much a visual experience as a narrative one.

"The animation throws *Proteus* into something that is beyond documentary into a sensory experience -- hopefully an ecstatic, visionary one," Lebrun said. "If I just presented the animation by itself, outside of the context of the documentary, it would probably seem experimental or radical. But by creating a documentary, I can hopefully propel the audience into a very intense, stroboscopic, hallucinatory animated experience."